

CLIMATE CHANGE & DISPLACEMENT

BACKGROUND GUIDE
CHALLENGE TOPIC #2



The [MUN Refugee Challenge](#) is an initiative launched by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes.

This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates as part of the 2022 edition.

Malian fisherman Yahya Koronio Kona, who was displaced several times because of drying lakes in Mali, fishes in the waters of Mauritania.
© UNHCR/Colin Delfosse



THE CHALLENGE

Climate change is the defining crisis of our time and its impacts are disproportionately experienced by people in vulnerable situations, such as those who have fled war and persecution. In 2020 alone, over 30 million displacements were triggered by environmental disasters. Most displaced people remain within the borders of their home country. Research suggests that without proper response measures, climate change could cause more than 200 million people to be internally displaced by 2050.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS?

The climate crisis is also a human crisis. In the coming decades, as extreme weather events (e.g. hurricane, floods) become more frequent and the slow onset of the climate crisis erodes communities (e.g. droughts and sea level rise), more people will be forced to abandon their homes.

Today, 80% of displaced people originate from countries that are most prone to the adverse effects of climate change. In addition, climate change is increasingly fueling other drivers of displacement, such as famine, conflict and economic collapse.

Ensuring that displaced communities have access to clean sources of energy is essential. 90% of refugees living in rural areas do not have access to clean and reliable energy, which has an impact on their health, education and livelihoods.





HOW IS CLIMATE CHANGE INTERACTING WITH DISPLACEMENT

Climate change fuels displacement



The majority of the people displaced by climate change are internally displaced persons (IDPs), meaning that they have had to flee their homes but remain within the borders of their countries.

Climate change can exacerbate conflict. For example, in the Sahel – where temperatures are rising much faster than the global average – diminishing water supplies have disrupted the livelihoods of local pastors and farmers, leading to [violent clashes in Cameroon's Far North region](#) over a dwindling supply. [In Afghanistan, the onset of the country's second severe drought](#) in just four years has added to the challenges people face – over 600,000 people have been displaced from their homes within the past year due to economic collapse, conflict and famine.

Climate change disrupts livelihoods. For instance, [in Mali, drying lakes threaten the livelihoods of fishermen](#), who are often forced to move to lakes in nearby countries such as Mauritania, where climate change has also led to dwindling water supplies. The scarcity of previously abundant resources such as water and fish stock has led to increasing tensions between Mauritanian herders and farmers and displaced Malian.



A Somali family who lost most of their livestock because of severe drought poses for a picture in Wajaale, Somalia, June 2017.

© UNHCR/Mustafa Saeed



HOW IS CLIMATE CHANGE INTERACTING WITH DISPLACEMENT

Climate change affects refugee communities

In addition to fueling displacement, climate change is also affecting communities that are already displaced. For example, In Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar District, [heavy monsoons have destroyed the homes of Rohingya refugees](#) living in camps.

In Somalia, where violence has devastated communities for decades, displaced people face the additional burden of extreme weather events and diminishing natural resources. [Cyclone Gati, which hit Somalia in November of 2020](#), took the life of nine people and affected over 180,000 others. Many of those affected were already displaced and living in makeshift shelters.

Climate change requires a shift towards clean energy

90% of refugees living in rural areas do not have access to clean and reliable energy. Access to clean energy is not only important in the fight against climate change but is also essential for the wellbeing of refugees. In some contexts, displacement itself can lead to environmental deterioration. For instance, the reliance of refugees on firewood can lead to deforestation, expose refugees to toxic smoke and places women and girls (who go looking for firewood after dark) at a greater risk of experiencing sexual violence.



Refugee and host community trained technicians maintain a solar panel that was broken in Buramino camp, Ethiopia.

©UNHCR/Diana Diaz



WHAT IS CURRENTLY BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?

UNHCR



- UNHCR works with policymakers to guide the interpretation of legal frameworks to protect people who have been displaced in instances in which climate is a factor. While the term “climate refugee” does not exist in international law, UNHCR is active in outlining cases where the 1951 Refugee Convention can offer protection to displaced populations.
- UNHCR helps preserve and rehabilitate the environment to enhance the resilience of displaced communities. Operations include UNHCR’s work in helping [Rohingya refugees restore depleted forests](#) and its efforts to [prepare for and avert disasters in Bangladesh](#).
- UNHCR provides refugees with clean and reliable forms of energy. Through its [Clean Energy Challenge](#), UNHCR has set an ambitious goal of bringing affordable, reliable and clean energy to all refugee settlements and nearby host countries by 2030.
- Another example is UNHCR’s efforts to bring [liquefied petroleum gas to refugee populations](#) to meet their cooking needs and decrease their reliance on firewood. In other areas, such as Jordan, UNHCR has installed a solar photovoltaic plant to bring reliable access to electricity to refugees, making Azraq refugee camp [the world’s first clean energy refugee camp](#). By installing [solar-powered boreholes](#), UNHCR also provides refugees and displaced communities with sustainable and clean access to water.
- UNHCR focuses on reducing its own environmental impact by substituting diesel with renewable forms of energy such as solar plants and installing energy meters at our offices around the world.

"In Bangladesh, for example, UNHCR and partners have been helping Rohingya refugees reduce the risk of flooding and landslides during monsoon season by planting fast-growing trees to stabilize hillsides, providing alternative energy sources to firewood for cooking, and training refugee volunteers as first responders."

— United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi



WHAT IS CURRENTLY BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?



REFUGEES

- In [Minawao refugee camp in north-eastern Cameroon](#), where deforestation had caused problems for both refugees and the local community, refugees stepped up to help UNHCR restore the lost greenery.
- In [Sudan's White Nile State](#), refugees and host committees together planted over one million trees to restore Sudan's forest cover.
- In [Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar District](#), more than 3,000 Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshis came together and received training that enabled them to manage seedlings and plant and care for young trees. Their efforts replanted more than 600 hectares, an area nearly twice the size of New York's Central Park.
- In Mauritania, [refugees have volunteered to receive training on how to safely create firebreaks](#) and protect camps and local villages from bushfires.
- Refugees are also an integral component of UNHCR's sustainable energy cooperatives, which are local livelihood projects that employ refugees and host community members in initiatives that bring clean and reliable forms of energy such as [solar-powered grids](#) to meet the needs of the local population.



Young refugees help plant trees from a tree nursery in Minawao refugee camp, Cameroon.

© UNHCR/Xavier Bourgois.



WHAT IS CURRENTLY BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?

BUSINESSES



- Many private sector partners such as Deloitte and Victron Energy participate in UNHCR's Clean Energy Challenge and help bring sustainable energy resources and infrastructure to refugee camps and displacement settings.
- Strategic partners, such as the IKEA Foundation, also play an instrumental role in the execution of UNHCR projects. For example, IKEA's project, the Azraq refugee camp provided affordable and sustainable electricity to approximately 40,000 Syrian refugees.

OTHER UN AGENCIES



- The International Organization for Migration (IOM) collaborates with UNHCR on the development of policy guidance for regional, national and international policymakers.
- UNICEF partners with young people to map out areas that are particularly vulnerable to climate change and works to ensure safety and access to services for all children displaced by climate change.

GOVERNMENTS



- Governments can grant asylum to people who are displaced by climate-induced conflicts
- Governments can ensure access to clean and affordable forms of energy for all refugees
- Governments can scale up financing for climate adaptation/ mitigation in developing nations that host the highest number of refugees
- Governments can join collaborative intergovernmental efforts such as the [Platform on Disaster Displacement](#). UNHCR and IOM are standing invitees in this initiative, meaning that they offer guidance and expertise to States when needed.



Questions to Guide the Debate

- What actions can we take to address the root causes climate displacement?
- How can we mitigate the slow environmental degradation (e.g. desertification, sea-level rise) that contributes to causing people to flee?
- How can we boost our emergency preparedness in response to natural disasters (e.g. floods, hurricanes, fires)?
- How can we make the infrastructure in refugee camps more climate-resilient?
- In our efforts to combat the climate crisis, how can we meaningfully engage refugee populations and create employment opportunities for them?
- How can we increase refugee access to clean and reliable forms of energy?
- How can we incentivize companies and private sector entities to contribute to the creation of greener infrastructure in refugee camps?

Useful Resources

Videos

- [Beating the Heat: The Climate Crisis is a Human Crisis](#)
- [Emi Mahmoud performs her incredible poem Di Baladna \(Our Land\) in honor of COP26](#)

Documents

- [Strategic Framework for Climate Action](#)
- [Key Messages and Calls To Action: COP26](#)
- [Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy](#)

Data Visualization

- [Displaced on the frontlines of the climate emergency](#)

Stories

- [Rohingya refugees restore depleted forest in Bangladesh](#)
- [UNHCR joins response to victims of hurricane in Central America and Mexico](#)
- [Warming climate threatens livelihoods of Malian refugees and Mauritians](#)
- [Solar cooperatives give refugees and locals in Ethiopia clean energy and livelihoods](#)

Contact us

If you have any questions about UNHCR's MUN Refugee Challenge or this background guide, please visit our [webpage](#) or contact hqmunrefugee@unhcr.org.